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ABSTRACT

A remarkable aspect of the present-day American linguistic and intellectual scene is the fact that public attitudes about language reflect neither scholarly efforts in the field of linguistics nor the intellectual spirit of the twentieth century in general. Prescriptive, absolutist linguistic attitudes on the part of intelligent, educated people persist against the development of structuralist and transformational linguistic theories and against the historical force of relativism and the scientific ethic of the twentieth century. This disunion between linguistic theory and public attitude, far from being an anomaly, is consistent with the interplay of certain historical, institutional, and sociolinguistic forces: the standardization, autonomy, historicity, and vitality of language. With these forces at work, the absolutist, prescriptive public attitude is a natural result of the linguistic ecology of America. (Author/RL)

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STANDARDIZATION AND THE ECOLOGY OF LANGUAGE: AN AMERICAN CASE

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A remarkable aspect of the present-day American linguistic and intellectual scene is the fact that public attitudes about language reflect neither scholarly efforts in the field of linguistics nor the intellectual spirit of the 20th century in general. Prescriptive, absolutist linguistic attitudes on the part of intelligent, educated people persist against the development of structuralist and transformational linguistic theories and against the historical force of relativism and the scientific ethic of the 20th century. This curious disunion between linguistic theory and public attitude is not an anomaly, as is frequently asserted. The disunion is consistent with the interplay of certain historical, institutional, and sociolinguistic forces.

In order to establish this, I will first briefly discuss the persistence of the prescriptive doctrine. Second, I will comment on the incongruity of this persistence in an historical framework, and finally I will comment on the disunion between linguistic theory and public attitude by suggesting that the absolutist, prescriptive public attitude is a natural result of the linguistic ecology of America.

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I

An examination of the articles and books having to do with English teaching and with language attitudes across the breadth of the 20th century reveals the soudness of the often stated charge that: "What passes for instruction in the native language is said to perpetuate the authoritarian viewpoint and Latinesque descriptions of 18th century grammarians, and to be out of touch with subsequent thinking and scholarship." (Kridler 1966).

For example, if one reads the English Journal, a principal publication of the National Council of Teachers of English, for this century one finds that generally correctness is king, in overt terms in earlier years and in more covert forms in later years. There is, of course, always the challenge being put forth by those influenced by the science of linguistics but the challenger never becomes champion.

One striking feature of 20th century attitudes as expressed in the periodical literature of the time is the strong continuity from the 19th century of genteel notions and apparatus into the 20th century. The genteel tradition was a device of the intellectual leadership during the Gilded Age. The tradition coalesced during the 1870's and was central to the national movement toward integration and consolidation, which came about as a reaction to the boundless, free-wheeling frontier culture of the earlier part of the century. The genteel tradition facilitated the aspiration for a sense of community

in the nation, for the eschewing of diversity and conflict. These are manifested in the science, arts and manners of the Gilded Age. The high premium the new leadership of editors and schoolmen of the time place on intellect and restraint in order to achieve and maintain social conformity and to tame the individual and make him responsible to the community signals once again the flow of puritan morality into American life.

This flow was manifested linguistically by an increased interest in language, especially in "linguistic etiquette" in genteel publications; in the reaction against innovation; in the application of intellect and logic to language; in the high premium placed by the genteel on books and authority; in the anglophile tendency of the genteel; and in the desire for a responsible, stable community.

In the early 20th century genteel themes and motives sound again and again in the rhetoric in articles about English usage and remedy for it. "Personal culture has not kept pace with our material advancement." "Civilization is conditioned by language." (E. J. 1918: 153).

> The impulse to correct, which is natural, and is very strong in some teachers, is good only when, like other natural impulses, it is properly regulated . . . . I am far from arguing against rigorous correction at intervals; but the wise and sympathetic teacher is likely to suppress something like five out of six impulses to chastise a fault . . . . (Cooper 1914).

There is in the early years of the century the creation of

much genteel-like apparatus which illustrates the continuity of the 19th century mentality. One of the most energetic arms of this apparatus was the American Speech Committee of the Chicago Woman's Club. Among the activities of the committee was a survey of "attitudes of different sections of the Chicago public with regard to the standard of speech in daily life," and a survey to see what was being done in schools "to raise the standards of American speech." There can be little doubt of the genteel motives of these activities when one encounters rhetoric of the typical sort which follows:

> A love and respect for language, our own language, can be made one of the great forces working toward solidarity of the American people. The mixture of many nationalities has produced a spendid race. Its language as well as its institutions must be safeguarded. (E. J. VII, 1918: 163-76).

Similar puritan-genteel rhetoric was associated with Better Speech Week, a movement of the 20s national in scope in which "many thousands of schools took part." (E. J. XI, 1918: 185-200). "The leaders of this movement have realized that Better Speech Week is but a beginning, and that this path of linguistic righteousness is as steep and difficult as such straight and narrow paths are wont to be."

A similar apparatus were the many "Better English Clubs" which grew up in high schools around the country (Crupton 1920).

It is clear, therefore, that there is an unusually strong puritan-genteel continuity in linguistic attitudes particularly

manifest during the first quarter of the century. Thus the strong prescriptivism of the 19th century carries over into the present century.

Nearer to our own time, in 1961 Joseph Mersand published a book, Attitudes Toward English Teaching, detailing the results of the questionnaire about linguistic attitudes received in early 1958 from 1250 educators, business executives, editors, librarians, publishers, legislators, and judges. Each group was asked appropriate questions about improvements, deficiencies, recommendations covering many aspects of English teaching.

The result revealed that prescriptive correctness had a hold on the minds of this population to an astonishing degree.

> In the contemporary discussions concerning the educational needs of our times, one frequently read the recommendations to "return to the fundamentals," "more grammar," "greater insistence upon correctness" and the like.
>
> It is obvious from these . . . criticisms that those who have been in contact with large numbers of employees in business and industry have noticed deficiencies in grammar. These criticisms are not new in the history of the teaching of English in America and some of the recent statements might easily be paralleled by others of 50 and 70 years ago. (Mersand 1961: 308).

In no other issue has the prescriptive attitude been manifested as clearly as in the controversy following the publication of Webster's Third New International Dictionary in 1961. The dictionary was met with nearly universal disapproval in the newspaper and magazine press, as well as in scholarly and professional journals. (Sledd and Ebbitt, 1962). This response was elicited by the fact that the Third was a product of the structural school of linguistics,

a signal of that school's firm establishment among professionals after a long and bitter struggle, and probably the apogee of the movement, after which comes the descent as transformational notions ascend to dominance. At any rate, the Third was the structural school's clearest exposure to the educated and intelligent general public.

Philip Gove, Editor-in-chief of Third, in his many published explanations and defenses (e.g. 1961) usually based his case on the following five principles, all basic concepts of the structural linguistics of the 1950's:

1. language changes constantly
2. change is normal
3. spoken language is the language
4. correctness rests upon usage
5. all usage is relative

The reaction against the Third was essentially a reaction against this well advertised descriptive nature of the document. Even the most important and credible of the critics admitted themselves that they acted "emotionally." It seems clear from an examination of their reviews that they acted without sufficient knowledge, research and responsibility, as well. The reason they so acted is the point. For whether or not the Third International is a good, bad or indifferent dictionary the nature of the reaction against it shows in clear, crystal form the strength of the prescriptive linguistic attitude in the mid-twentieth century.

Moreover, it seems clear that the educational strategies employed in response to Black English and to other non-standard varieties

in the schools in the 1960's and at the present time is evidence of the prescriptive thrust of public attitudes. Both the bidialectal strategies and the eradicationist strategies employed against Black English are, especially in the early school years, designed more to serve public attitudes than they are to serve student needs (Drake 1973). Clearly acting in conjunction with this prescriptive thrust were political motives (Kaplan 1969), including response on the part of the school to the virtually unquestioned value of social mobility (Drake 1973). Nevertheless the prescriptive thrust of public attitudes has been crucial to the development of policies regarding Black English and other non-standard varieties in the schools.

One only need recall the recent Newsweek cover story "Why Johnny Can't Read" (Dec. 8, 1975: 58-63) for evidence of contemporary strength of the prescriptive notion. Judging from the enthusiastic response to this article, prescriptiveness seems to have lost little of its popular appeal.

Nor does the revolution against the behavioristic basis for language study on the part of Chomsky and the other transformationalists change the nature and the need for protest against prescriptivism. It is true, of course, that Chomsky in Language and Mind (1968) charges that it is "ironic" that traditional grammar ("rational" grammar in his terms) should be accused of a Latin bias. He further claims that it has been "a complete misunderstanding" that leads to the charge of prescriptivism on the part of traditional grammar. Chomsky here is referring to the Port Royal grammarians and certain of their predecessors. He is probably wrong about them,

as the rationalist universal grammar was taken as embodied in Standard French, as against local varieties (Hymes 1976). As regards the retired bishops and amateur philosophers of the British 18th century, who are responsible originally for the attitudes discussed in this paper, Chomsky is surely not correct. As a result today's transformationalist and his offspring must also operate in opposition to the modern residue of prescriptivism. Chomsky terms it merely ". . . a confusion of the philosophical grammar with the effort to teach better manners to a rising middle class."

Paul Postal, a transformationalist colleague of Chomsky's states it with more detail:

> Prescriptive grammar, virtually by definition, involves resistance to the never-ending process of linguistic change. The baseless assumption behind this resistance is that we are headed for a breakdown in communication unless linguistic change is opposed by the guardians of the language. And this assumption, groundless though it may be, dominates much popular discussion of grammar and usage both within the schools and without, and even the most obvious evidence to the contrary does not seem to shake this false view . . . Prescriptive grammar tends to assume implicitly that human language is a fragile cultural invention, only with difficulty maintained in good working order. It fails to recognize that language is an innate attribute of human nature.
>
> Prescriptive grammar is thus not very much concerned with the nature of language as such, nor with the nature of English in particular. It is interested in 'correct English . . . '

Postal goes on to state that the interest of transformational grammar is in:

> . . . the vast body of structural and syntactic principles which are common to all varieties of English rather than in the minor details which differentiate them. These details are what have occasioned so much argument and emotion within the framework of prescriptive grammar. (1968: 26).

Significantly, the protest against prescriptivism is one of the few features that structuralism and transformational grammar have in common.

II

It seems rather clear, then, that prescriptivism is alive and well in 20th century America. Certainly, such absolutist attitudes are not consonant with the linguistic expertise and theory of this century. It is equally curious that such robust linguistic prescriptivism also fails to accord with the intellectual spirit of the 20th century. The powerful force of relativism and of the scientific ethic which mark this century would seem to have operated as a powerful corrosive and contrary force to prescriptive attitudes.

To be more specific for a moment, since the study of grammar is influenced by the general intellectual climate, it would seem then that the 1890's, science aside, would be more receptive to a descriptive doctrine of language with the implications of diversity, change and freedom than the earlier decades. John Higham in "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890's" (1965) discusses the period in terms of its three major intellectuals, James, Turner, and Wright, featuring the fact that their ". . . revolt against intellectual rigidities closely paralleled the assault in popular culture upon a

confined and circumscribed life."

This period marks a transition in American intellectual life. By 1912 America is in another stage of development from the 1890's--a philosophical attack on all formal systems of thought, on all fixed and final thoughts (White 1964)--on all, that is, except formal systems of linguistic thought.

Very rarely is language included in this attack. Veblen (1899), to be sure, does include language in his criticism of systems and formal abstractions in a manner that still appears contemporary--his assumption that people behave irrationally, his alienation, his idealization of the scientific mind. One could exhibit authentic echos from the 1970's. (cf. Kaplan 1969).

But Veblen was an exception. Although the development of structural linguistics has its roots in the tradition of progressive relativism through the influence of Franz Boas (Jakobsen 1944), via Leonard Bloomfield, Edward Sapir, and others and grows out of that most relativistic of sciences, anthropology, rarely does the question of linguistic attitudes receive discussion outside of the narrow confines of linguistic treatises. Leonard Bloomfield talks about them in Language, but the discussion never becomes more public among intelligent and educated people as do the related ideas of Dewey, Holmes, Beard, Turner, and other progressives. This situation prevailed even though linguists, especially Bloomfield (e.g. 1944), made a vigorous effort to reach the general public.

For example, the apparent analogy between Holmes' legal realism and linguistic realism (i.e. descriptivism) did not seize the imagination. Not even linguists, to judge from their discourse, were

aware of the relationship. But as Holmes was saying in The Common Law that the life of law is not logic, but experience, so linguists were saying in effect in rebuttal to the prescriptive view--that language is not logic, but experience--convention. Just as Holmes asserted that judges should exercise restraint in trying to intervene in the operation of human affairs in general, so linguists were urging teachers to use restraint in interfering in the writing of students. Curiously, linguists were aware of relativity notions in physics. The term was picked up in the 1920's by Sapir (Hymes 1976) and taken over by Whorf (1957).

Although the progressive dilemma--the desire for freedom as against the desire for control--would trouble thoughtful people for much of the century, not until the aforementioned Third International controversy, with its question of whether the existence and use of a locution makes it right, does the progressive dilemma become connected with language. But even then, so strong is the belief that language will degenerate without external control, that the dictionary dilemma is not generally recognized as another expression of the progressive dilemma.

In the other area of culture in which their history has tended to make Americans neurotic and irrational, sex, relativism and science, after considerable struggle, have finally had a significant effect. Witness the general acceptance of the work of Kinsey and of Masters and Johnson, and the subsequent successful popularization of their ethic by Reuben in Everything You've Always Wanted to Know About Sex, But Were Afraid to Ask and by The Sensuous Woman. Compare this with the attitudes with regard to the Webster's Third International

Dictionary or toward Black English, and it is clear that Americans have been less rigid in sexual attitudes than in linguistic attitudes.

Indeed, the central feature as regards the intellectual vis-a-vis linguistic attitudes is that in the 20th century a fierce tension--a split really--develops between linguistically expert intellectuals and other intellectuals.

III

What, then, can be suggested to account for this curious and often dysfunctional disunion? Should we be led to believe that language behavior and attitudes constitute some some sort of categorical imperative--immune to the pressures of the general culture?

Probably not. The pattern developed so far consisting of the confluence in the second half of the 19th century of urbanization and the continuity of the genteel tradition with the beginning of the modern school in America will account for the phenomenon of the continuity of correctness in the 20th century. However, more universal and abstract forces may play a role, as well.

Sociologists of language are beginning to investigate types of attitudes and behaviors toward language (Fishman 1972). I would like to overlay for heuristic purposes one provisional set of four such behaviors on the situation so far developed. One behavior is Standardization, i.e., "the codification and acceptance, within a community of users, of a formal set of norms defining 'correct' usage." (Steward 1968).

In each society the task of codification is assigned to certain groups (storytellers, teachers, writers, etc.). The desired "good" is formulated and advanced within the society in a number of ways, depending upon the society (exemplary texts, grammars, etc.).

Autonomy is a second common societal view of language. Autonomy is an attitude having to do with the perceived independence of

the linguistic system. Some language varieties are autonomous by virtue of sheer abstand, or sheer linguistic distance between one and another variety (Kloss 1952; Kloss 1967). On the other hand, languages that are linguistically quite similar to each other--phonologically, lexically and grammatically--may be perceived attitudinally and psychologically by the speakers of the language varieties to be quite different from one another. These are ausbau varieties because they differ by dint of sheer psychological effort. A major vehicle of fostering autonomy views concerning a language is its standardization.

Historicity is an inevitable behavior toward language. Every group of speakers of a particular language variety feels the need for a "respectable" ancestry for its language; and often for its standard variety. The means that societies employ for achieving historicity are varied and myriad.

The final attitude is vitality. The more numerous and more important the native speakers of a particular dialect, linguistic style, or language, the greater its perceived vitality and the greater its potential for standardization, autonomy and historicity. On the other hand, the fewer and less prestigious the speakers of a linguistic variety, the more likely it is to be viewed as an unworthy and contaminated instrument and the less likely candidate it is for standardization, and the less able it is to protect its autonomy and establish its historicity.

Fishman (1972) posits these behaviors as universals. They are referred to as such tentatively hereafter for convenience, but too little about such behaviors is yet known in detail to do this with great confidence. For this reason, also, it may be hard at present to conceive of standardization, autonomy, historicity, and

vitality as causal, and they are not posited here as such. As sociolinguists of language come to study behaviors and attitudes toward language as intensely as linguists study language behavior per se, such framework as the Fishman/Stewart 'universals' may contribute definitively to the understanding of such phenomena as modern American prescriptivism. For the present, if these behaviors are considered as tendencies found in most societies the Fishman/Stewart framework is useful for the consideration of the more concrete societal behaviors so far developed in this paper. Moreover, it is hoped that this material may contribute to the development and validation of such frameworks.

As regards standardization, the linguistic gatekeeps for our 20th century society have not been storytellers, scribes, writers or priests, but teachers. In this context let us recall the strong genteel continuity that I mentioned earlier.

Continuity is, of course, to be expected as in all historical patterns. However, this particular genteel continuity may be significantly stronger than usual historical continuity, because with the historical conjunction of the broadening of public education and the growth of the genteel tradition in the latter half of the 19th century, the genteel tradition becomes strongly institutionalized in the schools.

History teachs us that the values that a place, idea or institution begins with, all things being equal, will have a significant and often crucial influence on that place, idea or institution ever after. The confluence in the second half of the 19th century of the genteel tradition (with its reassertion of puritan values of community), and urbanization (with its values of mobility) with the beginning of the educational institution as we have come to know it in the 20th century must in the long run account for the remarkable

pattern that this study draws for language attitudes in the 20th century. The school is central to this pattern. The school was the dependent party in this tripartite configuration, and served as the main agency for the continuity of the genteel pattern, which derives its shape and its vigor from a manic sense of community and the nearly unquestioned value of mobility. (The social origins and positions of teachers were themselves a determinant. Against this gentility the ethos of science and relativism has had little influence, at least in the school room.

The interplay of the sociolinguistic normative force with the particularly strong institutionalization of the puritan-genteel thrust in our schools has served to re-fashion standardization as viewed in other cultural settings into an enduring absolutist prescriptionism in 20th century America.

Our society's recent fascination with Black English may be seen as facilitated not only by standardization but also by autonomy. Most linguists agree (e.g. Burling 1973) that Black English is an ausbau variety, and the school labors mightily to ensure the autonomy of Prestige English vis-a-vis Black English. The society in general has denied the vitality of Black English, therefore forbidding it a respectable ancestry. However, certain linguists such as W.E. Stewart (1972) and J. L. Dillard (1972) are collecting data on and building theories of Black English historicity. This effort together with the emerging Black pride is resulting in a fast growing sense of the history of Black English based upon the relexification of a proto-creole.

The vehemence of the Third International controversy is better

Understood if we realize that the dictionary is the main vehicle in American society for linguistic codification, one important basis for standardization. Dictionaries are crucial also to be the operation of the other societal behaviors toward language. The Third seemed to the public in 1961 to pose a threat to the operation of all universals--standardization, autonomy, vitality, historicity--in America.

These forces operate in many different configurations in different societies. They do not always serve to create as strong an absolutist, prescriptive societal attitude as we witness in the U.S. However, the universals' possible operation in this country in the historical environment of the confluence of the genteel-puritan tradition with the broadening of education, industrialization and urbanization may have so strengthened these societal behaviors so as to create a prescriptive strength that seems to defy 20th century American history.

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